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ABSTRACT

The importance in Japan of group identity, the Japanese approach to decision making, and the way in which the Japanese avoid conflict and build consensus when making a decision are characteristics of Japanese interactions that are critical for Americans to understand in order to communicate successfully with the Japanese. Those who would be involved with the Japanese should understand that, for most Japanese, primary identity will be with a larger group, not with oneself as an individual. They have a specific process for coming to agreement within a group and they will go to great lengths to avoid conflict, be it in the form of saying "no" or of confronting another person. The Japanese continually try to build consensus when they are working in groups, and they value harmony. Careful analysis of intercultural exchange between Americans and Japanese will lead to more accurate perceptions and improved communication. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SR)

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THE JAPANESE: CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

Paper Presented at Speech Communication Association

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Cultural misunderstandings between Japanese and Americans are not uncommon. The Wall Street Journal reports two such misunderstandings in an article entitled, "American Culture Is Often a Puzzle for Foreign Managers in the United States". The first example comes from a training session designed to teach Japanese managers how to work with Americans. Role-playing exercises for the Japanese, some of whom have had difficulty with American bluntness, are used. In one role-play a Japanese businessman was told to criticize an American employee's performance. The trainer reported, "It took five runs of the same situation until he was direct enough that the American could realize that he was being criticized" (Bennett, 1986).

A second example of a cultural misunderstanding can be found in a training film made by Americans for Japanese managers who must deal with American colleagues. "Living in the U.S.A.", portrays a Japanese employee angering an American colleague by repeatedly apologizing for a late report (Bennett, 1986). The act of making an apology has a different meaning to Japanese than it does to Americans. To the Japanese an apology may be simply part of a ritualistic behavior demanded by the occasion; while to an American an apology repeated many times could constitute obsequious and even irritating behaviour.

That Japanese, on governmental or corporate business in the United States, would learn American cultural idiosyncracies, as well as English, is expected. What about when Americans interact in Japan? There are several characteristics of Japanese interaction that are critical for Americans to understand in order to successfully communicate with the Japanese. The purpose of this paper is to explain the following characteristics: the importance of group identity, the Japanese approach to decision making and the way in which the Japanese avoid conflict and build consensus when making a decision. Because Japanese businessmen are the most accessible group to Americans, the paper will largely focus upon them. With some knowledge of major intercultural differences between Japanese and Americans, we can better interact as cultures. But first, why do we need to learn more about the Japanese?

The power and economic presence of Japan defies understatement. The spate of modern best-sellers about Japan indicate some of America's interest; evidence of the respect the business world holds for Japan's post-World War II resurrection can be grasped in books such as Ezra Vogel's, Japan as Number One (1979, chap 2). Our economic ties with Japan grow more entwining each year. Gibney (1975, p. 22), in his book, Japan: The Fragile Superpower, sums up the Japan-American relationship,

"Ideally, Japan and the United States should reinforce, enrich, and complement each other. If their economies cannot be harmonized, in a healthy tension, there is very little hope for the survival of free economies in a future world. They have much to gain by developing a sense of political and social community." He goes on to state, "For Japan, the fragile superstate, the value of American ties are obvious. For the United States the value of the Japanese relationship is less obvious, but nonetheless real. The American free-enterprise democracy, traditionally the youngest of countries, looks oddly old and tired as we approach another century. The Japanese, fresh and confident pupils, have a lot to tell their old teacher."

The Japanese have, thus far, learned much more about America than Americans have about them. The reasons for this are not topics of this paper. But, to achieve an open-mindedness, a curiousity about, and a willingsness to step into the thinking of another culture is now demanded of us. If we are to share an equal status with the Japanese, this is our task. Vogel (1979, p. 225) points out, "Introducing basic change is never easy. But to expect Americans, who are accustomed to thinking of their nation as number one, to acknowledge that in many ways its supremacy has been lost to an Asian nation and to learn from that nation is to ask a good deal" To expand, to learn about culture is also to ask a good deal.

Nowhere are the differences between Japanese and Americans more apparent than in their ways of looking at themselves primarily as individuals or as a part of a larger group. Every person, everywhere, is both an individual and a member of a group at the same time. Our respective cultures determine what importance we place upon our membership in groups. The amount of emphasis that either individuality or group membership receives is one of the sharpest delineations between Americans and Japanese.

In an unreferenced study cited in John C. Condon's , <u>With Respect to the Japanese: A Guide for Americans</u>, the early inculcation of reliance on the group for social cues is illustrated.

> A team of Japanese and American researchers visited several kindergartens in Japan. These included American schools and international schools strongly influenced by Americans. The researchers were interested in children's drawings. They wondered if, given the same instructions, the children from the two cultures would produce significantly different pictures. If Henry drew a piccture of the sun, for example, would he color it yellow, while Hiroshi's sun would be colored red, just like the sun in his country's flag? The answer, as it turned out, was a resounding yes, so much so that almost anybody could sort through the hundred of drawings and nearly always guess which were done by Japanese children and which were drawn by Americans (1984, p.7-9).

Culture is more a process than its products, more of an event than an object. The truly revealing differences appeared in how the two sub-groups of children went about making the drawing. The pertinent differences are summarized below:

1. The seating arrangements in each school were different. American classrooms tended to have individual desks, in all the Japanese kindergartens children sat around tables in groups of six or eight. Each group had its own name (usually a flower or bird) and the group served as a basic unit for assignments

2. The teachers' roles were different. When researchers visited American classrooms the teachers had the researchers deal directly with the children. In the Japanese schools all communication was handled by the teacher. She remained the authority.

3. The way the two groups of children began and ended each activity differed. The American children , when handed the paper, began drawing immediately and handed the paper in when they were done. The Japanese children waited until all the children had paper, then they looked at each other and talked a little about what they were supposed to do. Then, table by table, as if by signal, all the children would begin to draw. Throughout the activity, children would compare. Those who finished first waited until the others were done, and when all were finished the drawings were collected.

4. When Japanese children showed difficulty in drawing someone in the family the teacher would usually assist, sometimes by taking the child's hand and guiding the crayon. American teachers responded to children's difficulties by encouraging with words: "Just do YOUR best", or "It's YOUR father and YOUR picture and YOU should try to draw him the way YOU see him."

5. Finally, the order in which family members were drawn differed; the Japanese children regularly drew the father first, then mother, then older sibling, then themselves. The American children seemed to follow a random order, the only tendency was for some children to draw themselves first.

Condon (1984, p. 9) states," In countless ways, both obvious and subtle, the Japanese are encouraged to think first of being part of the group. 'We' always comes before 'I.' 'We'of this family, 'we'of this nation, or just 'we' who are together in a room talking. ...For Americans the individual, not the group is basic. So many of the values Americans hold dear---equality, democracy, freedom, privacy , and even progress are bound up with the American view of individualism. Cooperation and teamwork are important, to be sure, but these should arise from the choice and desire of the individual".

Other researchers, interested in confirming the difference in the basis of personal identity between Japanese and Americans have done so by studying Japanese and Americans at their respective places of employment. Browman (1984) compared Japanese and American personnel policies and suggested that an important distinction between the countries lies in the relationship between the employer and employee. Japanese men derive their personal identity in large part from the company for whom they work. This study suggests that the Japanese emphasize harmony, cooperation, mutual trust and team work, while the Americans stress competition, conflict, adversary relations, contract provisions, and individuality. This pattern of Americans seeing themselves as primarily individuals and Japanese seeing themselves as one part of a larger group can lead to misunderstandings.

Westerners may conclude that this perception of the group being foremost in Japanese personalities leads to an abrogation of personal responsibility, an avoidance of liability, if you will. Mikes(1980, p. 54-56), in The Land of the Rising Yen, states, "There is a horror of individual responsibility in Japan, engendering complicated and subtle ways of avoiding it." For example, we in the United States might vote to solve a problem in the context of a group but the Japanese would be

unlikely to do so. They dislike the idea of voting because it implies that the majority could force a decision on a minority whose consensual agreement is needed. They prefer instead to thrash things out and come to a compromise that even the minority can support. This attitude implies a respect for democracy and is a prudent way of sharing responsibility. No one can ever pin a decision onto one person; the responsibility for a decision is generally shared. Mikes (1980, p. 54) summarizes, "'Nothing is anybody's responsibility; everything is a joint venture."

That is not to assume that no one ever shoulders responsibility; individual responsibility is taken very differently than it is in the West. Clark (1979, p. 125-126) gives these examples of the Japanese interpretation of responsibility., "Japanese most frequently use the word 'responsibility ' to refer to symbolic assumption of guilt, the responsibility that is accepted for failure when, for example, the president of a loss-making company resigns, or the board of directors of a bank in which a fraud has occurred dock their own salaries to pay for the default. The rules of this kind of responsibility are simple, for it comes automatically with high position. When something goes wrong the senior man or group of men presiding over the mistake will 'take responsibility' to lift the blame from their subordinates."

Symbolic responsibility may not have much to do with real responsibility, or the moral and practical responsibility for daily works and deeds. Companies make the distinction between these types of responsibilities (Clark, 1979, p. 126). If a manager has a subordinate who ruins machinery because he misreads the instructions, the manager will be transferred but will be soon given another important assignment. However, if a manager is transferred because he authorized inappropriate amounts of credit to a client he will be put in the corporate equivalent of Siberia for four or five years although his chastisement may involve the simple moving of his desk to a position next to a window. Japanese businessmen often joke about the fear of their desk being moved next to a window (Christie, 1986). Many businessmen work together in one room in Japan and their desks are side by side. When a businessman's desk is moved to the window, that is a clear sign than he has done something seriously wrong.

This peculiarly Japanese response to responsbility is a product of unconscious social norms, not ideological rules. Once Westerners understand that in Japan people think, act and feel that their group is more important then their individual identity, they can begin to understand how decisions are made, how conflict is avoided, and how consensus is achieved. Decision making usually implies responsibility and people who have responsibility usually have the power to affect decisions. Therefore, the Japanese process of *ringi* should be explored.

Ringi as a Decision Making Process.

Ringi is Japanese for a particular decision process. Although the *ringi* system has an historical precedent, it's modern day definition in Japanese business is to make decisions by consensus. Approval is gained by the vertical and horizontal circulation of documents to the appropriate members of the organization. The *ringi* system is used for gaining support for decisions ranging from the purchasing of a word processor to a merger (Mitsubishi, 1983, p. 142-144). Using the *ringi* system, tactics, strategies, proposals or objectives are cirulated in an elaborate system to every appropriate member of the organization, after having been initiated by the group most directly concerned with the proposal. *Ringi* refers to the circulation of the more formal documents needed to finalize a decision. However, before this more formal process of signing documents is initiated, an informal discussion process is used, called *nemowashi*. *Nemowashi* comes before the *ringi* process and the understanding of it is a prerequisite to understanding *ringi*

Nemowashi is the process of gaining support for a proposal. A Japanese Business Glossary (Mitsubishi Corporation, 1983 p, 128-129) translates *nemowashi*:

> Literally, *nemawashi* means 'to dig around the root of a tree to prepare it for transplanting'. Adopted from this, the word refers to the ground work to enlist support or to secure informal consent from the people concerned prior to a formal decision.
>
> Japanese society operates on group decision or consensus, and *nemawashi* is an indispensable process in achieving consensus. It also avoids open confrontation.
>
> In Japan, a proposal will be revised in the process of *nemawashi* until it is molded into a form which is acceptable to all. So much time is spent in *nemawashi* that foreign businessmen often become exasperated waiting for a Japanese company to make a decision.

Typically, this decision making process is accomplished by meetings of the various department heads or section chiefs involved. The general consensus of the people who will be directly or indirectly involved with the implementation is sought. Next an informal, overall consensus in the firm is sought. Department heads will have meetings with other departments who may or may not be involved in the effect of the decision. Section chiefs or subsection chiefs would probably be at the meeting. If specialists are needed they will be called in for consultation. The purpose of these meetings is to give and get information, to analyze and think together about the possible ramifications of the proposal. If other information is needed, the party responsible for suggesting the change would go to the appropriate section chiefs and gather information. During this process the participants are both talking and thinking about the effect of the proposal, not only upon their own section but upon the other sections or departments in the company. After this kind of thorough discussion is deemed complete, *nemawashi* is complete.

Then the formal documentation or the *ringi-sho* begins. Each person who is involved in the particular decision, puts his seal (literally a stamp called a *hanko*) on the paper, indicating his approval. The *ringi-sho* is given to successively higher echelons of the company, each responsible person signing the documents with his seal, or *hanko*. Finally, the topmost managers receive the document but only after examination has taken place all the way up the chain of command. The top level managers give their approval and the decision is made (Sethi,1984, p. 36-37).

Within the context of this arduous and elaborate decision making process it is possible to see that conflict, as defined by Western standards, may not apply to the Japanese. That is not to say that the Japanese never have disagreements. They do, but their disagreements are less emphasized than is their mutual understanding. Likewise, their achievement of consensus is less an event than a product of an exceedingly thorough process for finding out what the level of support and enthusiasm is among the group for a particular change or project. With this background we can consider the concepts of conflict and consensus and what they mean in a Japanese framework.

Conflict and Consensus Building

In order to understand conflict and consensus among Japanese, one must understand the emphasis their culture places upon harmony. Allen (1981, p. 184) states, "The emphasis on harmony is characteristic of Japanese thinking about social and industrial relations. Harmony is contrasted with the method of confrontation which is thought to be the preferred method by which Western peoples handle their legal, social and industrial relations. Harmony is to be achieved if everyone does his duty in that estate to which he is called and differences are resolved not by majority decisions, nor diktat, but by discussion leading to a consensus."

With a Westerner's perceptual framework, one might ask if lawsuits are common in Japan and what attitudes they hold about litigation. How are those inevitable differences of opinion between human beings mediated or arbitrated? Perhaps the clearest clue to how much the Japanese value harmony is in their attitude towards contracts, litigation and lawyers.

Japanese and Americans differ widely in their attitudes towards contracts as a means of avoiding conflict. The typical United States view of contracts is that a contract should define the rights and responsibilities of all concerned parties and should seek to cover all possible contingencies (Tung, 1984, p. 45). An example is a marriage contract in the United States, whereby some people enter into an agreement about how the property will be divided if there is a divorce. The traditional Japanese view is that the relationship, be it a marital relationship or one between two companies, is the important focal point, not the way in which interactants will escape if the relationship sours. The relationship should be continuous and harmonious, pointing towards a mutual understanding to which both parties are committed. In Japan, not contracts, but relationships are negotiated.

Further understanding can be reached if one realizes that the Japanese view litigation as a last, last, last resort. Put in the framework of *ringi-sho* their abhorrence of litigation is easily understood. While Americans may view the negotiations process, for example, as not binding until the final papers are signed, for the Japanese, decisions are made in the discussion process and, agreement, when reached, is used as a basis for the next round of talks. In this way, the two parties negotiating learn to trust one another in the process of making decisions and initial trust is built upon in each successive round of talks

The Japanese attitude toward lawyers further bolsters the perception of Japanese as non-litigous people. Tung (1984, p. 44) states, "The Japanese generally believe that lawyers obstruct the development of cooperative business relationships. Because lawyers are hired to represent one side or the other they can even be perceived as an implied threat or unfriendly act (Upham, 1981, p. 152).

As harmony is paramount, and personal relations foster harmony, the Japanese believe that the major emphasis should be a continuing, long-term trustworthy relationship, based on the common needs of the specific parties. Even in situations which inevitably produce legal wrangling in the West, such as airplane crashes, the Japanese will not automatically resort to similar resolution patterns. In the February 1982 crash of a JAL jet, 144 people were injured and 24 were killed. None sued. The aggrieved parties understood that the airline would offer restitution, as much restitution as they would ever get by fighting a court battle. Public atonement was made when the president of JAL personally visited the family of each victim and bowed low. One cannot assume that the Japanese never sue or that they don't sue because of strict socio-cultural rules. The JAL episode can be contrasted with a fire in a hotel that killed 33 people. In the hotel incident, 8 suits have been filed and one reason given is that the financial assets of the hotel are not as great as those of the airline, so victims must seek restitution in the courts. For many reasons, the Japanese are not generally litigous. Taking someone to court is not a threat in a culture that offers other resolution paths (Wal Street Journal, 14 April 1983, p. 32).

Sethi (1984, p. 37) notes that the process of communication in a Japanese organization is "very much akin to the mating dance of penguins. Using both verbal and nonverbal communication, ...a great deal of ritualistic communication precedes and follows any substantive discussion. Participants know and understand who is going to say what, and to whom, before it actually takes place. And yet all concerned would be quite offended if the ritualistic behaviour was not strictly observed. A great deal is made of forms and gestures, leaving the listener to interpret the meaning of what is being said."

The author's (Christie, 1988) experiences corroborate this. To give two examples, when a Japanese businessman wishes to invite a colleague with whom he shares an office for an after-work beer, an effective way to do it is to lean back in his chair, stretch his arms out in a yawn, and offhandedly remark to his office-mate, "Oh, it is so hot today." This serves as an invitation to go out after work and the likelihood is great that the office-mate will understand with no other words uttered. Another

example of the ritualism in communication, one involving potential conflict, is the way in which a person might tell his next door neighbor that her dog is annoying him with its barking. He would say, "Your dog is very cheerful," and he could be fairly assured that the message received would be that the dog is noisy.

Ritualistic behaviours, both specific and general, can be observed in the *ringi* and *nemowashi* process (Sethi, 1984, p. 38). Consider the group who will be primarily responsible for the proposed change. First meetings thoroughly discuss the subject in an atmosphere of informality. A feeling of commaraderie reins. Factual information pertaining to the issue is mulled over. Gradually the group members will get a sense of the direction the group is taking. Exposition is emphasized over argument. If disagreement occurs, members try to accommodate all points of view.

Specifically, direct conflict is avoided (Sethi, 1984, p. 38). "If a member wishes to present an opinion, he does so by prefacing it with 'I happen to know someone who thinks that...;' or 'Let me say this, but I'm just thinking out loud.' This gives him a way out if he sees that what he says is radically opposed by other members." What the individuals want is acceptance and agreement before each makes his own opinion known.

Occasionally a heated argument may break out. When this occurs one of the most well respected members tries to reconcile both parties and sometimes one of the lower or middle status persons will try for some comic relief. (Sethi, 1984, p. 38). This process of trying to come to agreement will continue until about seventy percent of the members agree. If the proposal gains that level of acceptance, the minority will accede and will agree to support the proposal. An estimated ninety percent of the decisions made at the middle and lower level management in Japan are arrived at through this process. The groups reach consensus, not without disagreement, but with their emphasis being upon building agreement.

The Japanese have an admiration of what they call the "Middle Way" (Musashi, 1982, p. 30). Extremes in attitude or behaviour are avoided. A commonly quoted proverb is "the nail which sticks out will get hammered down." Coupled with the desire to maintain harmony, this attitude manifests itself in a reluctance to say "no" (Tung 1983, p. 53). Chie Nakone, a professor at Tokyo University says that the word "no" is almost never used (Van Zandt, 1970, p. 49). Van Zandt offers cues that will help a non-Japanese to determine if a Japanese is genuinely negative. Cues could include the drawing of breath between one's teeth and saying "sah", which carries no meaning, the response of "it is very difficult," or "I will consider it" are all likely to mean no. Tung (1984, p. 54) claims that the probability is 99% that a Japanese means "no" when any of these cues are given.

If these cues seem unnecessarily obtuse to a Westerner, they, nonetheless help the Japanese to avoid confrontation. Seward (1981, p. 43) lists twenty-eight nonverbal cues specific to the Japanese. Number seventeen describes one way the Japanese can communicatate that disagreement, or even a fight, is nearing: "A fast crossing or tapping together of the index fingers tells the viewer of strained relations or of a fight. It is an example of a gesture replacing a word that the Japanese would rather not say, as if its utterance would invest an unpleasant situation with more reality."

Nonverbal cues, verbal ritualisms, exceedingly thorough discussions and a culturally inculcated penchant for seeking the group consensus all provide the Japanese with a novel way of coming to agreement. Of course,there are disadvantages to these procedures. The time that it takes to do this and the knowledge of Japanese culture that an outsider must bring to any relationship with a Japanese are both formidable. It is of little wonder that the American who is trying to interact in Japan might become easily frustrated. With our admiration for quick results and up-frontedness, the clashes between American culture and Japanese culture may be even predictable. In summary, those who would be involved with the Japanese should understand that, for the Japanese, their primary identity will be with a larger group, not with themselves as individuals. They have a specific process for coming to agreement within a group, and they will go to great lengths to avoid conflict, be it in the form of saying "no" or of confronting another person. They continually try to build consensus when they are working in groups and they value harmony. A careful analysis of intercultural exchange between Americans and Japanese will lead to more accurate perceptions and improved communication.

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